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Syrian link to bombing confirmed

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WASHINGTON — Reagan administration officials confirmed Friday that five Syrian-backed terrorists confessed to the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, but said political instability in the Middle East ruled out any prosecutions.

The Herald reported Sunday that U.S. officials have known for three years who was responsible for the bombing, based on confessions extracted from the five participants by CIA investigators.

The U.S. investigators also found evidence that a Syrian intelligence officer was involved in staging the bombing attack that killed 63 persons.

"We do not question the story's accuracy," said a Reagan administration official, who confirmed the confessions and the evidence that Syria was involved.

He said the administration won't press for prosecutions by the fragile Christian-led Lebanese government because of the opposition such a move would undoubtedly generate in Beirut.

The administration also does not want to antagonize the Syrian government because of its recent mediating role in the release of American hostages being held by Shiite groups, the official said.

"We don't want to embarrass the Syrian government," the official said.

Reagan has publicly thanked the Syrian government for assisting in the recent release of Father Lawrence Martin Jenco. Three other Americans remain in captivity and U.S. officials hope Syria will continue to help.

A Syrian diplomatic official denied any involvement by his country in the bombing and said Lebanese interrogators used torture to obtain false confessions.

The Herald account was based on sources familiar with the 1983 investigation that led to the firing of CIA officer Keith D. Hall after

he tortured and beat the bombing suspects during questioning in Beirut.

One of the terrorists died from unknown causes in a Beirut jail after his tape-recorded confession.

Robert Dillon, U. S. ambassador in Lebanon at the time of the bombing, confirmed that confessions had been obtained from the five suspects and that U.S. investigators had succeeded in reconstructing the details of the attack.

"As a result of the interrogation of these ... people by Lebanese authorities ... investigators were able to put together a great deal of information about the tactical carrying out of the attack as it occurred," Dillon told The Herald.

After his firing, CIA officer Hall sought to appeal his dismissal.

In letters to President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz, Hall wrote that "the information I obtained while in Beirut was later proved 'valid' by a subsequent investigative team with polygraph capability."